

It’s 5 PM. Crowds are filling up St. Peter’s Square. Not a hint of a smile, but all eyes are fixed on the huge outdoor screens that have been installed on the square. Is the Pope dead ? No ! But he has stepped down as pope. He is leaving the Vatican because in three hours his renunciation of the Petrine ministry will take effect.

On the screen one can see Benedict XVI leaving and greeting those who have gathered in the Vatican courtyard. He is brought to a car with tinted windows. Three cars accompany him to a waiting helicopter. Smiling, but visibly worn out, he boards the helicopter. It is the end of his papacy at the Vatican.



The chopper takes off, rises above the Vatican, hovers over St. Peter’s Square for one last greeting, and then heads off to the south. The entire trip is broadcast live until he lands at Castel Gandolfo, where the Pope has chosen to stay until his quarters are renovated at the monastery where he will live on the Vatican grounds. Upon arriving at Castel Gandolfo, he gives a last speech not longer than a couple of minutes. He tells the crowd that has waited for his final blessing, «This day is different. At 8 PM I will no longer be pope. From then on, I will become a pilgrim who undertakes his last pilgrimage on this earth. »

It is 8 P.M. The crowd is still in front of the palace at Castel Gandolfo; others follow on television this unprecedented event in the history of the modern Church. We will never again see this pope and it ends with a small ceremony bringing the eight years of Benedict's pontificate to an end. At 8 P.M. the Swiss guard hand over control to the Italian national police. The door is closed. And the whole world understands that the See of Peter is now vacant.

All the channels broadcast the news. Now all eyes shift to the conclave that will elect the new pope. Cardianl arrive from the four corners of the world. They begin the preparatory meetings for the conclave.

During this whole time, everyone is making predictions about the various *papabili*, bets on who might succeed the pope emeritus. Opinions are split: for some, it would be a non-European; for others, it would once again be an Italian. The media rushed to present its favorites. In the end, a list of ten favorites fills the lines of newspapers and the airwaves, as if the media had already decided the eventual winner. Several Europeans, several Americans, several Africans, and even several Asians were ranked among the top contenders, depending on one's « political » persuasion or on journalistic analyses.

The question arose: When would the conclave begin? Finally, after the tenth meeting of the general congregation (the name given to the meetings of the college of cardinals), it was set for March 12 and would be preceded by a Mass celebrated in St. Peter's Basilica.

It is 8 A.M. Several members of the Due Pini community head down to the Vatican to attend this pre-conclave Mass. Around the altar, everything is red…..the rows of chairs prepared for the concelebrating cardinals, who slowly file into the basilica and make their way to the ad hoc sacristy set up for the occasion. A throng of photographers, both professional and amateur, position themselves to take shots of these prelates, especially those considered most likely to become the next Vicar of Christ.

The Mass is solemnly presided by the camarlengo, the dean of the cardinals, who in his homily makes reference to the pope emeritus, Benedict, and elicits sustained applause. The cardinal describes the pontificate of Benedict as one that was «luminous». He then calls upon the assistance of the Holy Spirit for the conclave set to begin that afternoon.



It is now 3:45 P.M. All the cardinal electors have gathered in the Pauline Chapel to pray. At 4 P.M. the litany of the saints is intoned and the procession begins to the Sistine Chapel. Once completed, the cardinal take a solemn oath of secrecy for the conclave. Then, once the words, «*Extra omnes*!», are proclaimed, all non-electors depart and the doors are locked.

On St. Peter's Square, the crowds await the first sign of smoke. Almost on signal, around 7 P.M., black smoke rises ---- indicating that a first vote has indeed taken place. Whatever slight hope that may have existed that a new pope would be elected must wait. Again, the next day, the crowds return for the second and third ballots. Eyes are fixed once again on the roof of the Sistine Chapel.

Around noon, black smoke rises once more and people's expectations focus on the afternoon ballots. Already at 6 P.M. the square begins to fill and those gathered have a sense that something may happen. And they are not disappointed. At 7:10 P.M. white smoke emerges from the chimney of the Sistine Chapel. The bells at the Vatican begin to peal and the crowds are jubilant. A new pope has been chosen.

As soon as they hear of the news, a few members of the Assumptionist community hurry to St. Peter's to find out who the new pope is. They notice throngs of people in the streets all streaming toward the Vatican. Within minutes St. Peter's Square is bursting at the seams. Journalists are everywhere. Every imaginable device to record images is activated (cameras, telephones, Smartphones, etc.).



